

A WHITE LIBERAL TRAPPED BY HIS PREJUDICES

Riot Draws the Lines in Kimberley

DAN JACOBSON

IT IS a curious fact that we have in recent literature introspection on practically everything that people could possibly introspect about. We know why people become Communists, and why they cease to be Communists; we know what it feels like to be the pilot of a jet plane going through the sound barrier, and what it feels like to be a poet in Bloomsbury; obliging schizophrenics have told us what an attack of schizophrenia is like. But I have yet to come across any introspection on race prejudice, though it is something that occupies our minds almost as much as Communism, and rather more than poetry. It is the subject, certainly, of enough reports and analyses. The reason for the gap in our knowledge would appear to be that those who draw up the reports and analyses are without prejudice, or believe themselves to be; and the subjects of the inquiries cannot introspect upon their prejudices—they can merely give vent to them.

Yet the reasons may be somewhat more involved than that, and perhaps some of them will emerge from what I am going to

write. I offer myself: I am racially prejudiced, and I don't believe in my prejudices. I would like to get rid of them, though I do not believe that under the present circumstances I can, and I am willing to help in the fight against them within myself and others.

HAVING reached that stage, my evidence is perhaps suspect. I am not *really* prejudiced, the argument might run, and so useless for the purposes of introspection upon race prejudice. That may be. It may very well be. But I sit here writing an article for a nice, enlightened magazine in America, and at the same time I know that if I go into the street and meet an African, I will talk to him differently from the way I would talk to a white man. I am not *really* prejudiced, perhaps: I wouldn't hit him for no reason, as a great many of my white compatriots might if the mood was upon them; I would shake his hand if he offered it; I would even invite him to the house if I were sure that the police and my neighbors would not know about it. But still, as we would draw together in the darkened street, as we would meet under a lamp post, and as I would ask him for a match, say, my words would be different, my very voice would be different to what it would have been had I addressed a white man. Why? And the answer is short and unmistakable. It is because he is an African, to use the enlightened name. Because he is a Native, to use the word which comes more naturally to my lips. Because he is a Kaffir, to use the most common, insulting word of all.

But when I try to find out why I should speak like this to him, I have to admit that I am baffled. I know all the reasons, of course. I am merely responding as I was

DAN JACOBSON here evokes for us the painful inner distress of the man of good will, brought up among the fires of race hatred, who cannot purge himself entirely of his prejudices, and indeed can find no practical way to take a stand independent of prejudice once violence has drawn the line. This personal document may tell us more than many factual reports of the significance of Premier Malan's resounding victory in the recent South African election. Mr. Jacobson was born in Johannesburg in 1929, attended the University of the Witwatersrand, and is at present in the stock feed business in Kimberley. He has been writing short stories for a number of years—two of his stories will appear in our pages during the coming months—and is now working on a novel.

taught to respond to people with black skins, at school, at home, in the streets, in jokes, in songs, in films, at dances, in every activity that I have ever undertaken and shared with my fellow white South Africans. I know that. Yet the bafflement persists. Because when I look back, I see that there were hundreds of other things I did in common that no longer have any effect on me. We hated the other boys who went to another school and against whom we played Rugby. I no longer do. We were crazy about American swing. I now find it dull. I was in love with Ingrid Bergman. I no longer am. All the poisoned entertainments and false sentiments about England (known to thousands of people who have never been there as "Home"), all the bad Zionist propaganda, the Jewish nationalism, the enthusiasms about boxing champions, all the things that I see hundreds of thousands of people around me taking part in, leave me quite cold. They bore me. I don't believe in them. Why then do I stick at this thing—this racial prejudice?

Again, there is a large answer. Because it suits me, as a white man, as a member of the ruling group. All right, I grant that. But I am not a white man only, or a member of the ruling group only. I am also me—a reader of *COMMENTARY*, an admirer of George Orwell, fond of traveling, trying to write a novel, raising ten red fowls in the back yard, quite harmless. Why does this me persist with its prejudices? I don't think that there is a short answer, once the white-man-ruling-class stuff has been set aside, and I believe that, to some extent, it can be set aside.

Nor do I want to mislead myself or others about this, and I don't want to stand here as a figure of complacent race hatred. I am a "liberal" in the precise South African sense of the word, and for want of anything better to take pride in, I am proud that I am a liberal. I want houses, education, votes, and equal treatment for the Africans of this country, all the things that are so obvious one feels stale repeating them. I am prepared to work for these things, if I knew of

people with whom I could work; and I am proud when I hear an African read a paper or make a good speech, or when he shakes my hand in friendliness, for then I know that I am right in what I believe, and that all the others who would treat him as a slave, and look upon him as a kind of ape, are wrong.

But the one thing doesn't cancel out the other. It is "liberalism" and myself that are condemned, but the tone of my voice, in the casual encounter, is still different. Why? Because he is black. He is different from me. And why is he different? Because he is black. The argument runs in a circle; it isn't an argument, it's a statement of prejudice.

LET me approach the same thing from another angle. I say that I would like to work for votes, houses, and education for the Africans, if I knew of people with whom I could work. The answer is obvious: work with the Africans. But I don't—and it is not only because of the danger involved, the possibility of arrest and imprisonment for attempting to work with Africans in political action. There are other reasons.

The blur begins to thin out a little, and I realize that I can't work with the Africans because I don't know them. I don't know how they think or what they think. I don't know their feelings, except in a gross sort of way, without subtlety in my guesses. I don't know what they want or whether they want the same things as I do. I feel completely strange to them, alien, though they are the people among whom I grew up, the people who have nursed me, and worked for me, and with whom I spend at least as much time as I do with white men. But I don't know them, or feel I don't, and can never know them, because they are black.

The blur dissolves a little and returns. And returns as ignorance. I can see through it a black arm, close-packed curls of hair, a black face, unknown, impenetrable. The skin color is what I am aware of, first and last, when I think of the African people. Black, other to myself. It is extraordinarily

difficult to pin the feeling down. The man, the African, is surrounded by his blackness; it moves with him wherever he goes, and whatever he does, and wherever it is, there is strangeness, the same unknown quality, until communication between us seems impossible, or possible only from a great distance, a matter of the broadest signals that cannot be misunderstood and that can say very little. For he is black and I am white, and there are differences between us, and I do not know him.

And that blur of ignorance, that failure of the imagination is at the heart of what I can only call my race prejudice. I do not know if it is only a personal failure, or whether the deliberate crippling action taken against me as a child was stronger than I thought it could be, or whether I cling to it because I believe it is in my interests to do so—but I do know that some part of my natural understanding has been extirpated and that ignorance of thought and feeling has taken its place.

But it is impossible to live in a mist, an absence of relationships. I have to place things in some sort of relationship to myself, construct some sort of hierarchy in which I and all the dark-skinned people that I meet can live, I have to give the African a place.

"PLACE"—the word comes appositely enough. For the first of the ten commandments in South Africa reads: every Kaffir must know his place. And what is a Kaffir's place? This image presents itself with warmth, almost with tenderness. His place is considerably below mine. It is a humble, rather poverty-stricken place, and he stands in the middle of it with his hat in his hand, waiting for me to pass, smiling, half bowing. I, then, am kind—if I too am imprisoned in my "place"; these things are double-edged—I give him the cigarette that I am smoking, and I mark that he takes it with cupped hands, for that is a sign of respect among Kaffirs who know their place. And so I pass on, warmed by my generosity, flattered by his gratitude, and soothed by the feeling that things aren't so bad after all.

Later, being a liberal, I shall revile myself, but in the meantime it has been very pleasant.

And though it may go against the grain, I have to admit that that paternalism, that feudal kind of attitude, is the only one with which it is possible for me to live among the Africans that I come into contact with. For I very rarely meet the doctors, lawyers, teachers, the politicians among them. I meet only the "boys" (another interesting word—"boy") who work in the same factory as I do, and above whom I am in a position of authority. And the authority and the paternalism, the superiority, becomes automatic, unquestioned by themselves and by myself, and we have some kind of relationship. And the pattern of the relationship spreads itself, insinuates itself into every action of mine, every contact that I have with the Africans, casual or more permanent, as the case may be. I feel no sense of strain about it, as long as the African sticks to his place: my relationships are prejudiced, follow their unfree pattern without tension or hysteria or discomfort. I am prejudiced as my eyes are brown or my hair straight, my skin white, without thought.

It is a fake, though. Being prejudiced as I am may be automatic, everyday, but it works only as long as the Kaffir stays in his place. But if he doesn't—what then? Well, then—again if I am at that moment trapped in my everyday waking dream—I suppose I begin to hector, or I become effusively "liberal," or something unpleasant like that. I no longer know where I am, and I no longer know what I am. I grope insecurely, lost.

But this is a curious thing. For if I am happy only when the object of my prejudice does what the prejudice demands he should do in terms of the prejudice, what about those whose prejudices take more violent forms than my own—the Gentile who sees every Jew as a threat to his way of life, a baby killer? What about every white South African who sees every black South African as a savage, a raper, an incendiary? Are they happy only when the Jew robs them, when the African rapes their wives?

It sounds grotesque. But living in this country, one cannot escape the feeling that the whites here are not merely misguided, frightened, and vicious. One mustn't underestimate them. The will of the Nazi Gauleiter, the lyncher of Negroes, the white South African may be diseased, but it is powerful, and no one can escape from what he himself has willed into existence.

II

THE two weekends before the Saturday of the riots had been troubled ones. Stones had been thrown at the police who patrol the African locations,* stones had been thrown at the buses serving the locations, notices had gone up outside the municipal beer halls in the locations calling on all Africans to boycott the beer halls.

Yet for all this, no one was expecting serious trouble. Stones are continually being thrown at the police by Africans, and the municipal ban on home-brewing of beer had been a long-standing grievance among the inhabitants of the Kimberley locations. True, there had been a new element in the preliminary troubles. The stone-throwers had shouted "Afrika!" when they had attacked the white man's police and the white man's buses—and "Afrika!" was part of the simple, effective slogan of the passive resistance campaign organized by the African and Indian Congresses in their struggle against unjust laws and *apartheid* regulations, for the sake of which 6,000 Africans and Indians had gone peacefully to jail in practically every town of importance in South Africa, including Kimberley. But if a drunkard shouts a political slogan, it is his drunkenness that is noted; if an African shouts a political slogan, memory is quick to remind that he is only a Kaffir.

We did not hear that there was a serious riot going on in No. 2 location until after we had heard the ambulance sirens down

*A "location" is a township outside any white town in which all Africans who work in the town have to live. One must add that they are usually the most hideous, disease-stricken slums imaginable, and that those in Kimberley are no exception.

Main Road and the alarm bells of the fire brigade, that Saturday afternoon, a peaceful afternoon in our part of the town, with the summer sun shining on all the gardens kept trim by so many African servants. Then my brother came in: he had heard that the police had opened fire against rioting Africans. We heard the ambulances again, and as the warm evening drew on, and the sunlight failed, the air of the town in which I have lived all my life, and which, even now, I can think of only as a place of peace and heat and sand on the edge of the desert to the south and west, was wild with the sound of sirens. And my sister ran into the house to tell us how lorry-loads of police had just been seen going down Central Road towards Green Point location. Central Road is the street I live in. But the police had all been armed with rifles and Sten guns, and as they passed my sister, they had waved and smiled and given the thumbs-up sign, and called to her, like soldiers anywhere in the world, calling to their own people, sure of their welcome, sure that the young girl will smile and wave back at them.

We had some sort of supper. Then it was night. The darkness was turbulent. We knew that the serious rioting was in No. 2 location, which is right at the other end of town, but why then was there so much noise in our part of town? We heard shouts, distantly, and all the time the wailing of the sirens. We went into the street, into Central Road, and outside it was worse. The noises came from all sides. Our neighbors too were in the streets, standing at the gates to their gardens, listening, standing in little groups of whites on the pavements, talking to one another. We went back into the house and sat around and stared at one another. I phoned up the offices of the local newspaper, and managed to get through after some time.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"I don't know," the voice at the other end said. "There's a bit of a do with the Wogs at No. 2 location."

"What sort of a do?"

The man was as cheerful as anyone could be. He chirped the news over to me. "They've burned down the beer hall and the municipal offices, and a whole lot else. We don't know yet for certain." Then he said: "The latest score is eighteen, I believe."

"What score? Score of what?"

"Dead Kaffirs." I could see his grin. "The police are shooting them like hell."

"What a mess," I said.

"Well, it's a bit of excitement," the other said more warmly. "But they're teaching them this time."

I WENT back and told the others what the newspaper offices had told me. We sat on. Then we heard two bursts of fire from a Sten gun, nearer to hand than anything that had yet happened. We had been hearing shots all the late afternoon and evening, but from a distance. This sounded more serious. We all went into the street again, and this time we were really frightened. For there is a police station at the bottom of the road, about half a mile from our house. It was too dark and confused to make anything out clearly: all we could see was a blaze of lights around the station. It was then that I feared the most. I was sure that the Africans were storming the police station, and how long would it be before they would be coming up Central Road, coming for us? There were a few more volleys of shots, all with the urgent guttural sound of automatic fire. And then we heard someone screaming, screaming, screaming, one voice over and over again, as a child screams. That was lost in a confused shouting of many voices, and then we heard a voice calling: "*Mayibuye, mayibuye!*" The word was said twice, clearer than the other shouting and the shots and the long wail of the ambulance dying away to a mutter. And "*Mayibuye!*" is the other half of the slogan in the campaign of peaceful, non-violent defiance of unjust laws. Together the words "*Mayibuye Afrika!*" mean "Come back Africa!" Come back Africa to the people to whom the continent belongs,

the black people who work for us, and are kicked by us, and thrown into jail by us, and whom we do not allow to enter our schools and our theaters, our playgrounds, our buses, our homes. Come back Africa to your people. We who have white skins have lost you.

We knew that we were lost all that night as the sound of the fighting died down, and silence resumed. We knew that we were lost when we stood with our white neighbors, our sharp physical fear of death guttering away from us, and agreed with them that all the police could do was shoot the Kaffirs down. We knew that we were lost when we agreed with Mr. Collins from across the road that the government should give every white man a revolver. And most terribly and desolatingly of all we knew that we were lost when we wandered into the back yard of the house, and saw our two servants standing there. Ben and Betty have been with us for years, and we thought we knew them so well, and they knew us, and that there was friendship between us. But that night Betty stood at the door of her room, in the darkness, and Ben stood leaning over the wall of the back *stoep* on the other side of the yard, and I and my brother and my sister walked between them, past them, knowing that they were looking at us, all the long way to the kitchen door, and I could not say one word to them, not one word, and nor could my brother or sister, none of us could bring out a sound to the two dark people who stood unmoving in the shadow of our home, silent. They let us pass in silence to the door of our house, and we opened it and closed it behind us, to get away from their dreadful rigid silence.

And that was how the riot, one savage and hopeless rising against the authority of the white ruling race, touched me, a member of that race. Now when peace and heat have returned to Kimberley, it seems like a bad dream. And most dreamlike of all, and yet most true to our white way of life, our white way of guilt, was the immediate and overpowering fear of death by violence at the hands of a black mob. For the white police

are stronger than any dark mob, and can easily stop a riot, or at least confine it to the African locations, leaving our wide, white areas quite safe. And even those shouts and shots near to hand were not, as we feared, a mob storming the police station, but only the police bringing their prisoners to Beaconsfield police station, the jail and other police stations being full. That was all it was. And we were safe that night, within our areas, as I am this night, or any other night of peace in this country. For my side have the guns. On the night of the riot those guns killed or seriously wounded over one hundred Africans.

MY SIDE. And hopelessly, I realize again that it is my side. There is a fatal logic about these things. So many whites have been oppressing so many blacks for so long that there are two sides only now, and we fall into them, willy-nilly. I am white. If the police had not been effective, and if the African mob had managed to break out of the location, I would have suffered at their hands like any other white man. I was as dependent as the most fanatical white African-hater on the Sten guns and rifles of the white police. For the Africans could not have distinguished between us; and in all humility I have to ask—why should they have distinguished? And there is no answer.

I know that it can be asked of me why I do not join the Africans in their liberatory struggle. I can plead what I believe to be the truth: that it is now too late: a skirmish in the liberatory struggle was fought recently at No. 2 location, and if I had not merely trembled at home but gone out to take part in it on the side of the Africans, with luck the police would have seen me as I approached the location and led me home as a madman who has to be protected from himself, and without luck the Africans would have got hold of me, and even though I shouted "*Afrika!*" with all the strength of my lungs they would have battered me to death or burned me to death as they have done to Europeans unfortunate enough to have been caught in African locations at the time of similar riots in the cities of Port Elizabeth and East London.

And then I can only add that I cannot join the liberatory struggle because I am an ordinary sort of person, rather feeble, prejudiced, not knowing the Africans, who wants to go on doing the sort of work that he likes and is best at. But one learns how undemanding frenzy and hatred are of their allies: it is strange to see one's desire to do the job of work that one likes and is best at, one's little prejudices, one's failures of imagination, returning, arm in arm with those who have guns in their hands and blood on their breasts.